

MY YEAR OF FREEDOM

Continued from page 4

sideration from all who have to do with the ordering of a prison régime, as the automatic obedience, which, under the rules, makes a good prisoner, goes far to unfit him on release after a long term to take a responsible place in this struggling self-assertive world. In all save those who have cultivated a spirit of resistance (however unexpressed) the will becomes utterly paralyzed, and every initiative dies of self-distrust. "Shall I," "May I," "Ought I" to do this, that or the other thing? are questions that ever haunt the mind, and resolution after resolution dies still-born. Yet society makes little or no provision for those who after long years of automatic existence are finally restored to freedom. Mere grown-up infants now in the most strenuous of worlds, with reputations shattered, and hardly anyone to say a good word for them or a kindly word to them, they are yet expected from the start to make their way against what would be nearly insurmountable obstacles under the most favorable conditions. And then when failure ensues in spite of the best intentions (as is almost inevitable except some friendly hand tides them over the breakers into what is at best a troubled haven), society visits their moral shipwreck with added penalties.

How much we are creatures of habit, or rather of successive and of repeated experiences, is well illustrated by my inability (compared with ante-prison days) to remember details such as names and dates. In all prisons to a degree, but in English institutions above most, the individual wholly loses his identity; nor is there aught within his ken by which to identify or remember the passing days, weeks or months. No newspapers are permitted, and even the innocuous almanac is credited with revolutionary influences. The only chronological break in an English prisoner's existence is marked by the bimonthly letter that one is permitted to receive, provided he has not infringed some rule and so forfeited this most highly prized privilege. Hence all those minute subdivisions of time by which one regulates existence in the outside world—such as stated household dates and visits—are represented under confinement by an absolute blank. Every minute detail of this existence in bondage is arranged, and as to no single act need one take previous thought, for your very rising in the morning and lying down again at night, as well as every other act of the day's routine, is regulated by the ringing of a bell. It has, therefore, been by no means an easy matter to take up the old life wherein I must attend to my doings and goings myself.

Much of life's daily routine is accomplished almost automatically or sub-consciously, because of frequent reiterations. But when one has no kind of time-experiences as background, one is wholly dependent on memoranda and the clock. Accordingly, it is not strange that I, in these circumstances, am often late in keeping appointments, or seem careless about this or that, when I am really not, or at any rate not through heedless inattention.

Shopping, which is commonly supposed to be woman's delight, was to me at first the cause of such bewildering perplexity as to fill me with dread. During my long seclusion from the seductions of fashion, so many new ideas had come in vogue that it seemed to me the world of fabrics had been entirely reconstructed. Not only was there the fact that many varieties, if not actually different in texture, bear other names in America from what I was accustomed to in England, but there were to a degree all the vagaries of fifteen past seasons to master. So it came to pass that for a considerable time it was far more experience than goods that I bought on my shopping excursions, and even now my feeling is that I shall never catch up.

"What do you wish, madam?" is the query behind the counter.

Weekly I state my requirements to the best of my ability.

"I never heard of the article—I am sure we do not keep it," accompanied by a tilt of the young saleswoman's nose.

Then, when I venture on an explanation, I am told in a tone of surprise, not unmixed with pity, that things of that sort have been out of date at least a dozen years and cannot possibly be had in an establishment which seeks to supply only the latest novelties.

Experience of this sort soon taught me the advisability of doing my shopping in friendly company or by proxy.

In prison the opportunities for noting changes in the fashions, especially in the

feminine world, were necessarily few and far between. Yet now and then a change was illuminating with regard to progress in general. For example: At the beginning of my sentence at Woking the high officials always appeared in frock-coat and top hat; but at the time of my release one now and again made an appearance in a light business suit with a slouch hat or panama. I had supposed that such a change, to what in my mind was associated with unconventional American modes, was simply impossible to staid Englishmen, and the sight in a way prepared me for the whirling changes I was later to meet; for when an Englishman gives up a long-established custom

for a mere matter of comfort, almost anything may be expected. Now and then one caught a glimpse of a woman visitor, but from such opportunities there was really little to be gained as to the changes in the world of fashion, inasmuch as almost everyone, and particularly if of the fashionable world, would naturally attire herself for such an occasion in her plainest and most antiquated suit.

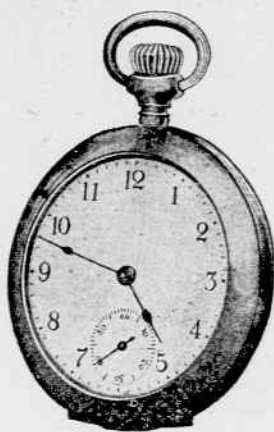
But how I have enjoyed once again the delights of music! In my time, except at chapel service, nothing was permitted that in anyway served as a means to musical expression. There were among the inmates professional musicians, and it was for these in the atmosphere so deadly in its repressive effect on the artistic temperament that one could not but feel particularly sorry. It was pathetically amusing, therefore, to observe under what extraordinary difficulties the passion for music sometimes sought to express itself. The cells in their barrenness naturally contained no article in likeness of a musical instrument, yet hands that had been wont to fly deftly over the keyboard of a piano might not always be controlled. There was one unfortunate in the "Star Class," with an uncommon musical gift, who, relying on my sympathy, again and again made rueful complaint because her small table as an imaginary keyboard heartlessly failed her at both ends.

"If only I could have one the right length," she exclaimed, "so as to get in all the bass and treble notes, I should be content!"

Another was a professional violinist, and her case was much worse. It was common to see her fiddle away, one arm across the other, and on occasion, to "heighten the effect" on her imagination, she would tuck the leg of a stool under her chin and saw across it with an imaginary bow. Access to a cane or umbrella for such a purpose would undoubtedly have fairly transported her. The ghost music thus evoked was no doubt heard by an inward ear, for the exercise seemed to afford the demonstrator no little comfort; but on me, a lover of music, these sorry imitations of the longed-for reality always produced a saddening effect. I am happy to add that in several American prisons I have recently visited, varied forms of musical expression, instead of being suppressed, are distinctly encouraged. To all who can play upon them, portable instruments are permitted, and in more than one institution I found organized bands, either string or brass.

Unless Englishmen and women have changed much since I was at liberty to mingle with them socially, the contrast between them and what I find in America is approximately the same spheres of life is great. Everybody here seems to be more individualized—to have a distinct identity—and it is through this marked individuality, I imagine, that success is achieved. In England, people are largely born into their social as well as political places, and their personalities are the result of fixed molds. In America, on the other hand, the "self-made" characterizes everyone, and likewise explains most things. Where in the Old World you call a person's calling by his dress and demeanor. There is the servant class, the costermonger, the small tradesman, and all are fixed types. I have lately been seeing something of what is known as the "East Side" in New-York, in company with a friend who labors as a nurse in that locality, and I find the dormant American characteristics manifesting themselves there as strongly as anywhere, especially among the younger people.

One of the chief delights of my regained liberty is the intercourse with children it affords. Robbed of my own little ones when they were at an age when child life is at its loveliest, it is cause for wonder that I now meet hungrily the companionship of these darlings of other loving mothers? The



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